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Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation

By D.Z. Phillips

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; xiv + 330 pp.; hb.
£ 45.00, pb. £ 15.95; ISBN: 0-521-80368-3/0-521-00846-8.

The Welsh Philosopher D.Z. Phillips dedicated this book to the memory of Peter Winch. As most of his work, he might have dedicated it to Ludwig Wittgenstein as well. The whole of Phillips's work in philosophy of religion can be read as a tribute to Wittgenstein: the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, and the Wittgenstein of the notes that were edited by his students after he his death.

1 Introducing the Hermeneutics of Contemplation

In a typically Phillipsian account of Wittgenstein, Phillips tries to find a new way of doing philosophy of religion. Since he does not want to choose between a 'hermeneutics of recollection' that is sympathetic to religion and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that conceives of religion as a product of illusion, he tries to find a third way of philosophising. This way he calls the 'hermeneutics of contemplation'. In contradistinction to those who assume that believers are in touch with something real and to those who deny that there is a divine reality in religion, Phillips asks whether religion has anything to say which is irreducibly religious (5). Phillips is not searching for an all-embracing theory of religion. Rather, he is trying to find a way to 'contemplate' the different senses which different beliefs can have. He acknowledges that some suspicions against religion are well-founded, but rejects the general claims of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

At the same time Phillips rejects the general claims of the hermeneutics of recollection and does not want to become involved in an apologetic undertaking; he just wants to 'contemplate' possibilities, he does not want to advocate anything. Conceptual elucidation does not imply showing that religion is illusory, nor does it imply that religion is advocated. A hermeneutic of contemplation pays attention to the place phenomena occupy in human life (10). Phillips refuses to make the, what he calls, false choice between interpretative concepts and unmediated experience. Concept-free experience is, according to Phillips, a logical impossibility. Reflective interpretations are dependent on concepts which are not further interpretations (11). In this line of thought it is equally silly to deny that a reductionist explanation of religion is not acceptable to a religious believer as it is to deny that there can be non-religious explanations of religion. The point Phillips wants to make is that the general claim of the hermeneutics of suspicion – that religious beliefs are

the product of illusion – cannot be acceptable to anyone who wants to remain a believer (13). The hermeneutics of contemplation aims at conceptual elucidation without reduction.

2 Conceptual Confusion

Phillips distinguishes between a false hypothesis and a conceptual confusion. A false hypothesis can be refuted with arguments or experiments. Conceptual confusion can only be shown by means of indirect communication. Indirect communication consists in going to the confused where they live, and getting them to retrace the steps which led to the confusion (15). This is the treatment Phillips in this book gives of the reductionist theories of religion. Thus, in the chapters on for example Freud and Durkheim, Phillips shows that their treatment of religion is confused even on their own – psychoanalytic and sociological – terms. The theories are shown to be not simply descriptively inaccurate, but also conceptually inadequate (24).

Positively stated, a central thesis of Phillips is that although there are distinctive religious meanings, these cannot be what they are independent of their relation to other aspects of human life and culture (25). In other words, religion is not a separate part of private human life. Hence, it can only be properly understood if it is placed within the context in which it functions; if it is understood in relation to other aspects of human life.

Bernard Williams, David Hume, Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, Tylor and Frazer, Marett, Freud and Durkheim, all receive the same treatment. All are shown to be conceptually confused, although much can be learned from them if only we do not run into the same confusion as they did.

Most important is the confusion, or better the mistake, to make general claims about religion. In line with the later Wittgenstein, Phillips is deeply suspicious of general claims. It is a mistake to think that general explanations suffice to explain religious phenomena. The following quote, for example, shows the point Phillips makes again and again:

Notice that the hermeneutics of suspicion does not simply offer or promote different perspectives on the world. It characterises religious faith as an illusion, and freedom from it as freedom from confusion. Therefore, the hermeneutics of contemplation is faced with a formidable task in suggesting that we should be suspicious of this general suspicion (33).

Being suspicious of the general suspicion, that is the typical task Phillips sets for himself. The point Phillips insists on is the generality of the explanations given. He, for example, does not want to deny that people can have anthropomorphic conceptions of God, but he denies that this must always be the case (39). Another quote clearly shows the difference between the hermeneutics of contemplation on the one hand and the hermeneutics of suspicion and of recollection on the other:

An hermeneutics of recollection, among the Greeks, would be one which argued for and advocated reconciliation with Zeus. The hermeneutics of suspicion questions the intelligibility of the whole notion. The hermeneutics of contemplation tries to elucidate, without advocacy, what it is like to see the world in this way (53).

Elucidating what it is like to see the world in this way. That is what Phillips does and this is the way he treats the different theories of religion he analyses in his book. He elucidates what it is like to see the world as Hume did, or as Freud did, or as Berger does. In doing so, there are always elements to be learned from the theories in discussions, and at the same time, Phillips always shows the confusion in the theories when religion is treated as something that can be explained in general.

One of Phillips's main assumptions is that the primary use of religious language is to offer people a way of thinking about their relation to the world. This implies that religious language is not primarily discourse about God or another entity about which nothing can be inferred from the world, according to empirist suspicious thinkers, but about people's relation with the world in which they live. The fact that nothing can be inferred from the world to God is no problem, in Phillips's view, because that is not what religion is about.

To those readers who are familiar with Phillips's view, nothing new has been said so far. The strength of this book, however, is not in the originality of his view, but in the thorough reflection on the merits of several 'suspicious' philosophers for the contemplative approach to religion. Phillips convincingly shows how religious criticism on the one hand should be taken very seriously and in the meantime can be made fruitful for a new way of thinking about religion.

3 A case study: Phillips's Reading of Ludwig Feuerbach

Because Phillips's approach to Feuerbach is a good example of Phillips's way of arguing in this book, I want to elaborate a bit on it. The chapter on Feuerbach follows on that about Hume. This is why Phillips shows first to what extent Feuerbach can be seen as an inheritor of Hume's legacy. Indeed, Feuerbach can be seen as the thinker who showed how the religious illusions, to which religion was reduced by Hume, came to be formed and believed. Feuerbach's first goal was to criticise Hegel's reification and objectifying of predicates. Feuerbach, following Hume in this respect, saw it as an example of philosophical confusion that God, Truth, Thought or Absolute Spirit were seen as real objects. Here, Phillips sees a Wittgensteinian tendency in Feuerbach, because he wants, in Phillips's words: 'to replace the mystifications of metaphysics with the realities of human existence' (90). Obviously, given Phillips's frame of reference, this is a good thing to do. With respect to religion, Feuerbach holds that God cannot be an object among objects. In Feuerbach's view, this is precisely what theologians assume when they attribute divine predicates to the divine subject. Of course this fits in with Feuerbach's analysis of religion as an external objectification of an internal human desire. It is typical for the method of Phillips that he takes one aspect from the theory, tries to isolate it from the rest of it and testifies that this is exactly the way the hermeneutics of contemplation functions. The 'proof' for this approach is always a comparison of the theory in question with the work of Rush Rhees or Peter Winch. In the case of Feuerbach Rhees comes in, introduced by these lines:

Once again, Feuerbach's claim has resonances with work in twentieth-century analytic philosophy of religion. Here, too, we find criticisms of the divorce between the divine predicates and "God" as a subject. For example, Rush

Rhees shows how this divorce is linked to the confusion of treating “God” as though it were a substantive or proper name (93).

In the next step of the argument, Phillips tries to find a way out of the problems of the theory at hand. In the case of the objectifying tendency in theology, he proposes an alternative by asking whether it is possible to see the ‘is’ in a sentence like ‘God is love’ as a grammatical rule in dogmatics instead of a predication. According to Phillips, then, ‘the predicates become grammatical predicates of a grammatical object, not descriptions of an independent existing object of which they happen to be true. They define the parameters of the divine under certain aspects. Thus one avoids Feuerbach’s fears...’ (95). What a theologian or ‘contemplative hermeneutic philosopher’ may learn from Feuerbach is how the confused rupture between the divine predicates and ‘God’ as a metaphysical subject separates such a ‘God’ from the practical realities of religion and runs the risk of making ‘belief’ a purely theoretical belief (cf. 96). Rhees understood this when he pointed out that the question whether God exists is not a theoretical question. This is why philosophy can answer the question ‘Does God exist?’ neither positively nor negatively. Phillips’s method here is to show that Feuerbach was right when he said that God is not a metaphysical subject, but wrong in stating that this implies that God’s predicates can only be human qualities. Phillips sees it as his task to show that these predicates can surely be something else. He illustrates this point with an extensive discussion of possible reactions to death. By elaborating on this, he shows that people have more options in coping with death than only accepting finitude on the one hand or hoping for survival after death on the other; in other words, they have more options than trust in humanity or trust in God. He shows that a variety of reactions to death is possible. The task of the hermeneutics of contemplation is to contemplate on these possibilities without first reducing them to infalsifiable theses such as ‘God judges the living and the death’ or ‘life is all there is. Dead is dead’. Philosophers, just like other persons, do not have a privileged position from which they can judge the claims of others. The whole of Phillips’s work, including this book, can be seen as a thorough application of the Wittgensteinian insight that no privileged positions are possible in any domain of life and thought.

4 Summing Up

As I said above, Phillips gives the same treatment to other general approaches of religion. Anthropological, philosophical, psychological and sociological approaches of religion are all discussed and shown to be confused. All approaches have a good point, a point to be taken up into a contemplative approach of religion. The insight of Marx and Engels for example was the importance of social relations. The confusion, according to Phillips, is the metaphysical claim that society is a ‘substance’. The Marxist view on society is monistic and does not allow for different views on society and social heterogeneity. Also the Marxist point of religion as ideology is a good point, but this does not mean that all religion is ideological as Marx assumes. Monism is a disease most of the approaches suffer from. The primary problem of monist approaches is that religion is explained in terms of which

religious believers would not agree with. Phillips's hermeneutics of contemplation is an effort to overcome any monism in approaching religion and contemplating on the consequences various views on human life have. In discussing the work of Lévi-Bruhl it becomes very clear what Phillips understands by contemplating different views, when he observes that Lévi-Bruhl suggested that magico-religious beliefs are doomed to pass away. Lévi-Bruhl, as well as many others, saw an inevitable progress in history. Phillips comments: 'Had he looked in another direction, had he contemplated the variety of meanings in our discourse, including religious meanings, Lévi-Bruhl might have seen why Wittgenstein said: "Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us." (266).

The penultimate chapter is dedicated to Peter Winch and it will be clear by now that he is treated differently, because Phillips sees him as a fellow-contemplative philosopher. Most important is the concluding remark of Winch quoted by Phillips: 'The problems spring in large part from certain peculiarities of our notion of *understanding*, rather than from peculiarities about the relation between one culture and another.' (317) Phillips goes on to say: 'A central issue in understanding any culture will be whether we can get the hang of the people, whether we can find our feet with them.' (ibidem)

In the last chapter, then, Phillips tries to elucidate what understanding is. According to Phillips, understanding is in the first place trying to do justice to the world around us and to the people who live in this world. His main concern is doing justice to the possibilities of religious meaning, without denying or advocating these possibilities beforehand. This book is a good example of doing justice to people who approach religion suspiciously; a good exercise for all theologians who think they know in advance that Feuerbach or Marx cannot be right in their treatment of religion, and finally, a good exercise as well for all who think that religion cannot have anything irreducibly religious to say.